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Campaign News

Victory for Wirral Libraries

UNISON has welcomed the news that plans to close 11 libraries on the Wirral have been shelved. The victory comes after months of campaigning by local residents, MPs and UNISON, and an investigation into the effects of the closures was launched by the then Culture Secretary, Andy Burnham.

The victory sends out an encouraging message to campaigners across the country who are fighting to save their local libraries from cuts and closures – libraries which face challenges include:

Edinburgh – library staff face uncertainty over their future. The council now employs 19 fewer full-time qualified librarians than it did a year ago. This follows a two-year review which has seen the number of library posts decline. Figures show that there were only 66 full-time qualified librarians in May this year, compared to 85 a year earlier. A quarter of the city’s libraries have no full time librarian, and many librarians have had to accept lower-graded roles. The result is that staff morale is at an all time low. UNISON is fighting the changes which will see all 300 of the council’s library staff given new job roles and job descriptions.

Southampton - Five out of six libraries in Southampton are to close for three weeks due to modernisation works. Each library will be equipped

with new technology for borrowing and returning books, CDs and DVDs. But residents have complained that plans to cut jobs in the next two years from 110 to 89, and the introduction of automated systems will threaten traditional services and de-humanise the library service.

For more on libraries visit: <http://www.unison.org.uk/localgov/library.asp>

High cost of consultants revealed

An investigation by UNISON has revealed that councils across the East Midlands region are spending around £150m on consultants and agency workers.

The data obtained under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act show that:

- Wellingborough Council spent 13% of its staff budget on consultants
- Leicester City Council spent £18m on agency workers – this represents 6.8% of their staff costs
- Charnwood Borough Council has spent £1.8m on consultants – one of the highest percentages of staff costs in the region.
- Councils across Notts spent more than a combined £50m on agency workers and consultants last financial year.

UNISON East Midlands last month launched the campaign “Cut waste – not services” and is calling for councils to cut waste rather than jobs and services which communities depend upon. For more information visit: <http://unison-em-loc.gov.blogspot.com/2009/10/cut-waste-not-services.html>



Privatisation News

Police services face privatisation threat

Police services across the country face the threat of privatisation as a result of severe budget constraints.

Last month, the chief police watchdog backed the outsourcing of services such as transport, human resources, finance and uniforms, to cut costs. This could lead to an increase in the number of police authorities which have outsourced services to private firms, including IBM which has a contract to provide back office services to Avon and Somerset police.

Meanwhile, UNISON has stepped up its campaign against controversial plans by Cleveland Police Authority to privatise parts of its Information Technology and customer services in the Cleveland Police Control Room. Earlier this year, the union launched a petition so that the people of Cleveland could have the opportunity to show the police authority their opposition to the proposals. For more information visit the Cleveland Police Authority UNISON branch: <http://www.unison-cpa.org.uk/whatson.htm>

GP privatisation legally challenged

Plans by NHS Camden to sign a £20m contract with Care UK to run a GP-led health centre in Euston, London, have been put on hold, following a legal challenge mounted by campaigners.

Local campaigners are concerned that NHS Camden has failed in its legal duty to consult patients over the proposals to open a GP-led health centre in Camden, despite clear advice from former health minister Ben Bradshaw that there should be local consultation with the public to ascertain that it was required.

Campaigners are also concerned that the super health centre may threaten the existence of other GP surgeries which could be starved of funding, forcing their closure. They believe that funding for the health centre, which is not new money, would be better

spent on improving existing practices in South Camden.

Doctors from GP practices in Regent's Park, Somers Town and Bloomsbury concerned about the future of their practices put in a bid for the £20m NHS contract but their experience and knowledge of local patients were ignored in a secretive tendering process. A judicial review has been lodged in the high court and this action could lead to patients having more of a say in the future of the NHS.

Care UK, which is at the centre of this controversial deal, is set to expand its empire after it signed a £7m contract with Portsmouth City Council to run a 92-bed home for dementia sufferers. The firm has also been awarded a contract to run two mobile health centres in Manchester. It currently runs three doctor's surgeries and health centres outside London.

Meanwhile, Care UK has become an attractive target for private equity firms because of its success in securing lucrative public sector contracts. The firm recently rejected a take over bid from private equity firm Bridgepoint Capital.

Health privatisation: "secret" talks revealed

An investigation by *Pulse* has revealed that a series of secret meetings between the NHS and private health providers have been held in a bid to encourage the private sector to compete for the new wave of polyclinics and GP-led-health centres. According to *Pulse* those private firms which attended the meetings have bid for and won contracts for dozens of GP-led health centres around the country, and are also bidding for health centres in London.

Privatisation Problems

NHS paying for ISTC failures

Patients having hip replacement surgery at independent (private) sector treatment centres (ISTCs) are up to 20 times more likely to need painful, expensive repair operations, according to a new study.

The study by orthopaedic surgeons in Cardiff found that of 113 hip operations on patients sent from their NHS trust to Weston-super-Mare treatment centre between 2004-2006, two thirds showed evidence of poor surgical technique, such as poor cementing of the hip. As a result of the botched operations, many patients are being referred back to NHS hospitals to undergo painful surgery at a huge cost to the public purse.

Private firms fined for price-rigging

The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) has fined 103 construction firms £129.5m after it found that they had colluded with competitors on public building contracts.

Following the fines, councillors in Islington have called for a full investigation into contracts awarded to its private partners, which were among the firms fined last month. They include Kier Group, which is to bid for Islington Borough Council's £700m housing refurbishment contracts. The firm was fined £17.9m, the largest single fine in the industry. Kier Group also has a £600m contract to build 36 secondary schools in Kent, and is involved in a multi-million pound project to build public sector projects for Devon County Council. Despite the fine, Kier Group has managed to win £665m worth of new work – this includes a £600m 10-year deal to repair and maintain 16,000 council homes for North Tyneside Council. More from: <http://www.of.gov.uk/news/press/2009/114-09>

Carillion criticised over meals

Patients at the new £256m Queen Alexandra Hospital have complained about hospital food which is being prepared off site by a private firm.

Hospital meals used to be prepared on site for patients by hospital staff but are now being made at Tillery Valley Foods and then reheated on wards.

The catering service was outsourced to private firm Carillion in 2005, which brought about the changes to food preparation in the last year. However, patients have expressed their dissatisfaction with the catering

service and have criticised the food as bland and being served cold.

Jock McLees, chairman of the Local Involvement Network (LINKS), which monitors the Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust, said: 'We are getting a significant increase in the number of people who are unsatisfied with the catering they experience at hospital.' UNISON has produced a guide on how branches can use Local Involvement Networks to scrutinise health providers: <http://www.unison.org.uk/file/A6681.pdf>

LIFT schemes not value for money

A recent study says that Local Improvement Finance Trust (LIFT) schemes – a derivative of PFI - offer poor returns, despite being part of a £1.5bn mechanism to improve primary care services in partnership with the private sector.

The study was carried out by the York Management School and was funded by the NHS service delivery programme. The study concluded that LIFT schemes do not offer value for money, and that it was important for the costs to be evaluated and controlled.

Despite the high costs of LIFT schemes, a number of PCTs plan to use them. They include Enfield PCT which proposes to create 11 polyclinics and close many traditional GP surgeries. NHS Blackburn also plans to build a £21m health centre, which will be financed by LIFT, but the scheme will cost more than £50m in repayments over 25 years.

You can download the LIFT report from:

<http://www.nhsconfed.org/Documents/The%20Role%20and%20Effectiveness%20of%20Public-Private%20Partnership%20-%20Mathias%20Beck.pdf>

Council resorts to outsourcing

Wycombe District Council has outsourced its customer services function to a private firm, using the excuse of "unprecedented demand", which saw just half of calls being answered.

The council opened up a £500,000 customer service centre in 2005, offering an efficient and fast service to local citizens. But only 55.5% of calls were answered in 2008/9. The council blames the drop in service on huge demand as citizens ring to enquire about benefits as a result of the recession, leaving staff unable to cope.

Northgate Public Services is now handling all customer service enquiries for the council at its High Wycombe offices.

Reports

UNISON Response to Lord's Inquiry on PFI

UNISON has submitted evidence to the House of Lord's Select Committee on Economic Affairs, which is conducting an inquiry into Private Finance Projects and off-balance sheet debt.

Our submission highlights concerns around the methodology of PFI, risk transfer, costs, disclosure of information, value for money and the impact of PFI on the workforce and service provision.

UNISON's submission shows that there is a growing body of evidence that PFI is costly, complex and inflexible and does not provide high quality services. It is extremely difficult for UNISON branches and local communities to access information on major projects involving millions of pounds of money that impact on their services and jobs. PFI projects are also largely kept off the public sector balance sheet.

Our submission also highlighted the illusory nature of risk transfer of PFI/PPP schemes, as it is the public sector which picks up the risks and additional costs when projects fail.

UNISON is calling for PFI to be replaced by a public service funding model to ensure a more efficient, flexible and cost effective way of funding public infrastructure projects.

You can download the response from:
<http://www.unison.org.uk/file/B4785.pdf>

See also UNISON's report "Reclaiming the Initiative: Putting the Public Back into PFI":

<http://www.unison.org.uk/acrobat/18461.pdf>

PFI does not offer value for money

A recent study has concluded that support services provided by PFI hospitals are more costly and at a lower quality than those provided by non-PFI hospitals.

The research, conducted by the Centre for International Public Health Policy, Edinburgh University, cites an unpublished report by the National Audit Office (NAO), compiled in 2007. It compared the cost and quality of security services; linen and laundry services; portering and cleaning services in the first wave of PFI hospitals and non-PFI hospitals, and showed that all four services were cheaper and of better quality in non-PFI hospitals.

Cleaning services were highlighted as poor and more expensive, with 41% of clinicians reporting that the level of service was "poor" or "very poor".

You can download the full report: "The experience of the private finance initiative in the UK's National Health Service" from here:

<http://www.health.ed.ac.uk/CIPHP/>

School building – costs soar

A recent study by the PPP Bulletin has revealed that the costs of Building Schools for the Future programme (BSF) have soared. Information obtained under the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act show that 31 councils have seen their expected costs rise from an initial £122m to £161m – a rise of nearly a third. Spending on external advisers was £81m, almost 70% of the total costs.

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